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ABSTRACT

The adult educator should take some specific steps before the first students arrive to meet the needs of students with different orientations. A 15-20 minute interview helps the teacher to get to know prospective students. The physical facilities should be conducive to learning, including adequate lighting, a comfortable room temperature, an informal seating arrangement, and study carrels. Methods and materials should be varied to suit adults varying in experiences, achievement levels, and preferred learning styles. Classroom procedures and other pertinent information should be explained in clear and simple language. A course syllabus shows students specific steps to take to reach their goal. To set the stage for future learning, the teacher should take the following steps during the students' first visit to an adult education class: establish a learning environment of mutual respect, trust, helpfulness, and acceptance; review institutional expectations, use of materials, and learning procedures; explain the diagnostic uses of testing to reduce the fear of tests and remove the threat of grades; make sure students learn something that is both rewarding and relevant; and ask students to complete an assignment before their next visit. (YLB)

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TECHNíQUES

Set the Stage for Student Success

by Barbara Hinton, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

First impressions are lasting impressions! Therefore, the first impression a student has of an adult education class sets the stage for that student's success in the future.

Adult students are usually oriented in one of several ways. Learning-oriented students seek knowledge to increase their background of information. Activity-oriented students seek adult education as a means of socialization. Goal-oriented students view education as a means for accomplishing clearcut objectives. However, some adult students may have a very narrow goal, such as completing a GED. Others may have a non-specific or an unrealistic goal. These students will need guidance in order to establish a specific, appropriate goal. You as an adult educator must address the needs of students with these different orientations early in their adult education experience.

There are some specific steps you can take before the first students arrive.

Know Your Learners

Use 15 to 20 minute interviews to get to know the prospective students. Have an interpretator available to aid you with English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Answer the students' questions. Seek to relieve their anxieties about returning to school. Determine their goals and interests. Have career exploration materials available for students whose goals are undefined, narrow, or unrealistic. Many adults are unaware of the options available to them. Guidance materials which are commercially available include games, audio-visual presentations, and computer-assisted programs. Work through these materials with the students to help them explore the many options available to them. Help the students determine both short-term and long-term goals appropriate for their interests, abilities, and needs.

Arrange the Physical Facilities

Make sure the classroom has adequate lighting and a comfortable room temperature. Be sure the bulletin boards are appropriate for adults. Arrange the seating in an informal arrangement. Provide study carrels for students who prefer to work without the distractions of others.

Plan Varied Methods and Materials

Adults vary greatly in experiences, achievement levels, and preferred learning styles. Some prefer visually presented materials such as texts, workbooks, programmed materials, modules, and learning kits. Others learn best when several of the senses are involved, such as vision, touch, and hearing. Provide audio-visual aids such as card readers, cassette tapes, and video tapes in addition to written materials. Closed-circuit television or educational television can be successful delivery systems for adult education programs. Computer-assisted instruction (CAI) is useful for adult education settings because it allows individualization of subject matter, is endlessly patient in presenting drill and practice, branches to reteach a concept when necessary, and provides immediate feedback to the learner. CAI also provides the privacy in learning that many adults prefer. ESL and low-level readers benefit from small group and one-to-one instruction. They also require materials with a controlled vocabulary. Plan a variety of materials and delivery methods to accommodate the wide range of needs of adult students.

Provide Information

Explain classroom procedures and other pertinent information in clear and simple language. This is especially important for non-readers, low-level readers, and ESL students. Be careful not to talk down to these students or to give them too much information at once. Prepare a course syllabus and other pertinent information for students who are pursuing a specific course, such as a GED. Use large-size print and allow plenty of white space on printed materials. Be sure the material is written at an appropriate reading level. A syllabus can easily be altered to provide for individual differences and is extremely beneficial to students who need to know what specific steps to take to reach their goal.

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Prepare Yourself

Dress conservatively. Be rested and relaxed. Adults often read non-verbal cues more readily than verbal messages. Plan activities and organize materials carefully to avoid a confused, flustered, or disorganized first impression.

During the First Class Visit

There are some things you should do during the students' first visit to an adult education class to set the stage for future learning.

1. Establishment of a learning environment of mutual respect, trust, helpfulness, and acceptance is primarily your responsibility. Welcome each student in a warm manner and smile sincerely. Speak in a natural, informal style. Call the students by name. Assure them that you are there to help them learn. Do not pretend to know everything. As adults, your students will know more than you do about some subjects. Use their special knowledge to increase their own self-esteem. Assure them that you will not do anything that might cause them embarrassment.

2. Review institutional expectations or concerns, use of materials, and learning procedures. This information can be presented orally and/or with written instructions, depending upon the achievement level of the students. Clarification of these points early will help to avoid confusion later. Encourage interaction. Ask questions and encourage the students to ask questions. Read their non-verbal cues for signs of confusion.

3. Adults fear tests. Explain the diagnostic uses of testing. Emphasize that tests will not be used as punishment. Remove the threat of grades if possible. Emphasize the achievement of specific objectives rather than competition for grades.

4. Adults seek immediate reward and immediate utilization of facts, concepts, and skills. Do not disappoint them! Make sure that they learn something during their first visit that is both rewarding and relevant. It may be as simple as learning to write their name.

5. Ask the students to complete an assignment related to their own goal before their next visit. The assignment need not be difficult nor long. Make sure it is relevant and achievable.

Summary

With planning, the first adult education class experience can meet the varied needs of the students and can create a positive atmosphere for future visits. The activity-oriented students will realize how the class can be a setting for socialization and interaction as well as learning. The learning-oriented students will be assured that relevant learning will indeed take place. The goal-oriented students will understand how their goals can be reached. Students with non-specific, narrow, or unrealistic goals will be able to explore options open to them. You as an adult educator can accomplish these goals by planning ahead and by setting the stage for student success.

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